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TAGS: [CASC](#) [MARR](#) [MAS](#) [MCAP](#) [PREL](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: COUP PLOTTERS' CONVICTION WARNING AGAINST  
"MILITARY ADVENTURISM"

REF: A. MANILA 03800 STANDOFF WITH FORMER COUP PLOTTERS  
ENDS PEACEFULLY  
[1](#)B. MANILA 03797 SENATOR AND FORMER COUP PLOTTERS  
WALK OUT OF COURT PROCEEDINGS IN PROTEST

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Philippine government and military officials are lauding the April 9 convictions of nine Philippine military officers for attempting to overthrow the government of President Arroyo in July 2003 as the first such convictions in Philippine history. The officers recently changed their pleas to guilty, but stiff sentences were meted out to them for their roles in the failed coup plot: two Army captains received life terms, and the others were sentenced to 6-12 years. Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Esperon told the Ambassador that the sentences were "good," as they sent a signal to both the Philippine military and society that "military adventurism was ending." In response to rumors of possible presidential pardons for the nine officers, General Esperon confided to the Ambassador that it was not his decision to make, but at the proper time "it might be the right thing to do." General Esperon went on to say he hoped the soldiers could be rehabilitated and possibly even be brought back into the Philippine military, similar to other former military officers who have been arrested and detained for trying to topple previous administrations. END SUMMARY.

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THE OAKWOOD MUTINY  
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[1](#)2. (U) On July 27, 2003, 31 junior officers from the Philippine military, citing pervasive corruption at the highest levels of the Arroyo Administration, seized the Oakwood Premier Apartment complex in Makati City in an attempt to force President Arroyo to resign. The episode included then-Navy Lieutenant Antonio Trillanes, who later was elected to the Senate while under detention, and Brigadier General Danilo Lim, later arrested for his role in a separate coup plot in February 2006. The plotters succeeded in rigging the Oakwood building with explosives, but surrendered peacefully to authorities nineteen hours later. All 31 soldiers were arrested and charged with plotting to overthrow the government. A commission established by the Arroyo Administration later that year alleged that this action by military officers was part of a larger conspiracy to topple the government.

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HARSH SENTENCES

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¶3. (C) Unlike Senator Trillanes and General Lim, who participated in several coup attempts (REF B), senior military and political leaders widely believe that many of the officers involved in the Oakwood incident -- including those convicted April 9 -- were young officers whose idealism allowed them to be misled. After spending five years in detention, the nine soldiers changed their pleas to guilty, reportedly to win leniency from the court. The judge, however, gave them harsh sentences -- 6-12 years for seven of the officers, and life sentences (up to 40 years) for two captains.

¶4. (C) During an April 9 ceremony commemorating the sacrifices of U.S. and Philippine soldiers at Bataan and Corregidor, Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Hermogenes Esperon confided to the Ambassador that the sentences were "good" as they sent a strong signal to both the Philippine military and society that "military adventurism was ending." In response to rumors of possible presidential pardons for the convicted nine junior officers, General Esperon told the Ambassador that it was not his decision to make, but at the proper time, "it might be the right thing to do." General Esperon also went on to praise one of the convicted plotters, Philippine Army Captain Gerardo Gambala, who was sentenced to life imprisonment, as an excellent officer who had served on his operations staff in Mindanao. Noting that Gambala had distinguished himself at the Philippine military academy, Esperon voiced the hope that officers like Captain Gambala could be rehabilitated and perhaps even be brought back into the Philippine military.

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FUTURE PARDONS?  
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5.(C) The potential for rehabilitation and acceptance back into the military is not unknown in the Philippines, as former military officers who have been arrested and convicted of trying to topple previous administrations have returned from jail to pursue successful careers in the military as well as in politics. A good example of an officer whose career was not hurt by participation in an attempted coup is Marine Corps Brigadier General Juancho Sabban, current commander of the Marine Task Force in Sulu. While a junior officer, he was involved in a plot to overthrow the government of then-President Cory Aquino. Another Philippine military officer whose attempts at destabilizing various Philippine governments have not adversely affected his electability is Senator Gregorio Honasan. Honasan, a Philippine Military Academy graduate, was charged and arrested for his alleged involvement in multiple coups attempts against former President Aquino in the 1990s and was arrested and detained for his alleged involvement in the 2003 Oakwood mutiny. He eventually was elected Senator.

¶6. (C) Lawyers representing some of the convicted officers recently cited unnamed Arroyo administration official as being amenable to some form of presidential pardon or a possible reduction in their clients' sentences. They also speculated that the convicted officers might serve time in prison until the end of President Arroyo's term in 2010, when she might grant them a pardon. Chief Presidential Legal Council Sergio Apostol was quoted as saying the nine officers convicted on April 9 qualified for presidential pardons, like any other convict.

KENNEY